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Cognitions of Ordinary Events: Their Relationship to Depression

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ABSTRACT

Beck's cognitive theory and the reformulated learned helplessness model suggest that there is a negative idiosyncratic cognitive style that characterizes the way depressed individuals appraise events which is causally associated with depression. Although a few researchers have recognized the importance of examining appraisals of everyday events, no study has investigated the relationship of everyday event appraisals to depression. Therefore, using a cross-lagged panel correlational design, 197 college students cognitively appraised a carefully defined set of ordinary (everyday) events. Results revealed that depressed subjects appraise the causes of unpleasant events as more global and stable than nondepressed subjects. Similarly, depressed subjects appraise these unpleasant events as more important and show a higher level of characterological blame. Evenhandedness analyses suggest that depressed subjects, in comparison to nondepressed subjects, make similar global and stable attributional ratings for unpleasant and pleasant events. This pattern of evenhandedness for globality was inconsistent with current explanations of the phenomenon since depressed subjects were more global than nondepressed subjects in attributions for pleasant ordinary events. Finally, a causal relationship between cognition and depression was not found since the null hypothesis of spuriousness could not be rejected.

Cognitions of Ordinary Events:
Their Relationship to Depression

Recently there has been an integration of the two currently dominant models of depression -- Beck's cognitive theory (e.g., Beck, Rush, Shaw & Emery, 1979) and the reformulated learned helplessness model (e.g., Miller & Seligman, 1982). Researchers who adopt this integration suggest that there is a negative idiosyncratic cognitive style that characterizes the way depressed individuals appraise events and that this cognitive style is casually associated with subsequent depression (Hammen & Mayol, 1982; Sacco & Hokanson, 1982). This perspective has been explored by studies that have investigated the cognitions depressed subjects make about various types of events: life events (e.g., Gong-Guy & Hammen, 1980), hypothetical events (e.g., Seligman, Abramson, Semmel & von Baeyer, 1979), and laboratory tasks (e.g., Miller, Klee & Norman, 1982). However, the results of these studies offer an inconsistent, often confusing picture of the relationship between cognitions and depression.

Perhaps the strongest support for the theory has been obtained by Seligman and his associates using their Attributional Style Questionnaire (ASQ). The ASQ contains a set of 12 hypothetical events. Subjects imagine that each event has occurred, write down the cause and then rate this cause on the attributional dimensions of internality, stability and globality. Seligman's results have been remarkably consistent with his theoretical predictions: global, stable and internal attributions for negative events correlate significantly with depression, while specific, unstable

and external attributions for positive events correlate significantly with depression (Seligman et al., 1979; Raps, Peterson, Reinhard, Abramson & Seligman, 1982). In contrast, other researchers, also using the ASQ, have not found results as strong (e.g., Blaney, Behar & Head, 1980).

In addition to this basic correlational research, several studies have assessed cognitions and depression over time in order to examine the causal (or predictive) relationship between antecedant cogntions and subsequent symptoms of depression. Golin, Sweeney and Schaeffer (1981), using a cross-lagged panel correlational design, found that stable and global attributions for negative events on the ASQ were causally associated with depression. However, there was no support for the causal role of internal attributions in depression. In contrast, Peterson, Schwartz and Seligman (1981) found, using a multivariate regression design, that cognitions (attributions as measured on the ASQ) did not predict subsequent depressive symptoms 6 or 12 weeks later any better than simply using the original Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) score. Hammen, Krantz and Cochran (1981), using a hierarchical regression analysis, found a very weak relationship between cogntions and subsequent depression two months later. This study used subject selected stressful life events to elicit cognitions.

A major problem in these studies has been in the event stimuli used to elicit cognitions. The events used have either been infrequent, atypical events — such as major life events or distinct academic situations — or contrived, unrealistic experimental tasks. In addition, researchers have either assessed too few

events (which results in low reliability) or combined together many different types of events which may produce results that are difficult to interpret.

This latter problem is illustrated by the ASQ. The events on the ASQ are a heterogenous set: some major life events, a few everyday events, some events that a subject has not yet experienced and perhaps a few events that a subject will never experience. When ratings across a heterogenous set of events are combined together this may produce a "cognitive style", but this style may be an artificial end product that is not a valid indicator of how an individual would actually appraise an event in ordinary life. Others have criticized the use of hypothetical events altogether (Coyne, 1981), but when the naturally occurring events are used the investigator often cannot distinguish between differences in events that happen to depressed versus non-depressed groups and differences in cognitions about the events. Some events may be more likely to imply negative cognitions than others.

One explanation for the inconsistent and often weak results found in previous studies may be related to these problems in event selection. In essence, very little attention has been given to the selection of the events used to elicit cognitions. Previous studies have not examined how depressed and non-depressed individuals appraise everyday, ordinary events. If the way individuals cognitively appraise events is of primary importance in the development of depression then this cognitive style should be evident in how individuals appraise everyday, ordinary events.

This emphasis on understanding how people interpret everyday events is not totally new. In their study on coping, Coyne, Aldwin

and Lazarus (1981) stressed the need to examine everyday events, specifically how depressed persons cope with the stresses of everyday life. Yet somewhat inconsistently, this study focused on coping assessments of the most stressful events that had occurred in the past month. In a related study, Kanner, Coyne, Schaefer and Lazarus (1981) used a list of "Daily Hassles and Uplifts" to explore the relationship between the frequency of these daily events and psychological symptoms. One of the major conclusions from this study was that daily hassles, although they overlap considerably with life events, "operate quite strongly and independently of life events in predicting psychological symptoms" (pp.20,21).[1]

Although Coyne, Lazarus and their associates did not assess causal attributions of the events, the results are relevant in showing that the frequency measurement of events that occur and reoccur in peoples' lives is a better predictor of psychological status than the measurement of infrequent but major life events. This finding suggests that cognitions that occur and reoccur (i.e., those made in response to daily events) will prove to be a better predictor of psychological symptoms than infrequent event cognitions (i.e., those made in response to life events).

Although a few researchers have directly recognized the importance of examining everyday events, no study has actually investigated depressed and nondepressed subjects' cognitions of ordinary events. A cognitive assessment procedure based on ordinary events eliminates many of the methodological problems found in previous studies while directly addressing the theoretical question

of how individuals interpret their everyday experiences. This was the focus of the study reported here.

Method

Ordinary events were defined as common occurences in the everyday lives of adults interacting with the environment. These events are neither specific to a particular age group nor to a particular work setting. Although individuals will experience particular ordinary events in different frequencies the events are, by definition and empirical validation, familiar to almost all adults. Specifically, ordinary events were defined according to three basic criteria: Frequency, unexceptional nature and distribution in the adult population.

A large group of events were written according to these definitions (see Table 1). Events were then eliminated if they were not reliably classified as unambiguously either pleasant (positive) or unpleasant (negative) by a group of raters. The frequency of occurrence of these remaining events were then rated in a pretest session by 46 introductory psychology students. On the basis of these pretest ratings, 43 events were found to have occurred at least once in the past month to at least 80% of the sample. Twenty of these events were then selected (ten pleasant and ten unpleasant) for use in this study. The pleasant and unpleasant events were yoked (unlike other studies) such that for each unpleasant event there was a pleasant event representing the opposite experience. (See Table 2 for list of 20 ordinary events.)

Subjects were instructed to "vividly imagine the event occurring in your life today." For each event, subjects then

wrote down one major cause of the event and then rated this cause on 7-point scales for degree of internality, stability and globality. Similarly, subjects then rated the degree of control they would expect to have over the event's occurrence, the importance of the event and how they would feel if the event happened (very upset to very pleased). The wording of these questions and the 7-point scales used were similar to the question asked on the ASQ (Seligman et al., 1979) and the Attribution Questionnaire (Gong-Guy & Hammen, 1980).

A separate group of 213 introductory psychology students agreed to participate in two 1-hour group testing sessions that were separated by a four week interval. In the first session these 213 subjects completed the above questionnaire and the long form of the BDI (Beck, Ward, Mendelson, Mock & Erbaugh, 1961). Four weeks later 193 subjects (91% of the original first session sample) completed the same questionnaires.

Results and Discussion

BDI scores of subjects who completed the first session were divided into quartiles. The upper quartile, the "depressed" group consisted of 48 subjects who scored 10 or above on the BDI. The lower quartile, the "nondepressed" group, consisted of 63 subjects who scored 2 or below on the BDI. The mean scores of these two groups on the dependent variables were compared using Hotellings' Multivariate T Squares and univariate ts (See Table 3).

The depressed group rated the causes of the unpleasant events as significantly more stable and global than the nondepressed group. Subjects in the depressed quartile also rated the unpleasant events

as more important, more upsetting and indicated a higher degree of characterological blame (a composite measure based on stability and internality scores) than subjects in the nondepressed quartile.

Students in the depressed quartile rated the causes of the pleasant events as significantly more global, but indicated less control over the occurrence of the pleasant events than did subjects in the nondepressed quartile.

Further analysis (see Table 3) indicated that students in the depressed quartile were significantly more evenhanded (similar) in their ratings of unpleasant and pleasant events on the dimensions of stability, globality and importance than were students in the nondepressed quartile.[2] However, the pattern of evenhandedness for globality was inconsistent with current explanations of the phenomenon. This explanation suggests that evenhandedness results from depressives lacking the normal self-serving attributional bias and/or their being more accurate than normals in their appraisals of events (Alloy & Abramson, 1979; Alloy, 1982). Yet, in the current study, "depressives" do not appear to lack the self-serving bias as they were more global rather than less global in their causal attributions of pleasant ordinary events than "nondepressives".

When ratings of internality, stability and globality were combined into an attributional sum for each unpleasant event, depressed subjects were significantly higher than nondepressed subjects. The two groups were virtually identical on attribution sum scores for pleasant events (see Table 3).

The synchronous correlations between the BDI and each of the

cognitive variables for the unpleasant events are presented in Table 4.[3] Although many of these correlations are significantly different from zero only one correlation was above .30 (globality, first session). The synchronous correlations for the pleasant events, between the BDI and each of the cognitive variables, were all smaller than .2 and only a few were even significantly different from zero (data not included).

The causal role of cognitions in depression was explored using a cross-lagged panel correlational analysis (Kenny, 1975, 1979; Kenny & Harackewics, 1979). If the assumptions of synchronicity, stationarity and equal stability are satisfied (also see Cook & Campbell, 1979) then a cross-lagged analysis can tentatively test whether the relationship between two variables is spurious (resulting from the effects of some third, unspecified variable) rather than causal. All three assumptions were satisfied for the globality, importance and attribution sum variables for unpleasant events and the control and importance variables for pleasant events. The differences between the cross-lagged correlations for these variables were not significant.

In contrast, Golin, Sweeney and Shaeffer (1981) using a similar cross-lagged panel design did find evidence suggestive of a causal relationship between particular cognitions (globality and stability attributions for unpleasant events, but not for internal attributions) and subsequent depression. The major difference between these two cross-lagged panel designs appears to be in the type and number of events used. Golin et al. used the ASQ with its heterogenous set of 12 events, while this study

used a homogenous set of 20 ordinary events.

In summary, the current results offer weak support for the reformulated learned helplessness model, with a notable lack of support regarding the role of internal attributions in depression. However, this finding should be viewed with caution given the dubious validity of the internality dimension.[4] In the cross-lagged panel analysis it was not possible to reject the null hypothesis of spuriousness (in favor of an alternative causal relationship between cognitions and depression). Thus, the causal relationship between cognitions and depression as postulated by Beck's cognitive theory and the reformulated learned helplessness model was not observed.

The question is then why this study, which used ordinary events, common events that were carefully defined and empirically shown to be part of everyday life, produced perhaps the weakest evidence of a relationship between cognitions and depression? In addition, depressed subjects here were more global in their attributions of pleasant ordinary events than were nondepressed subjects which is contrary to the reformulated learned hlplessness model and previous findings. In contrast, Seligman and his associates (1979) produced stronger results using the ASQ with its heterogenous set of events. Why does this heterogenous set of events produce a stronger relationship between cognitions and depression? One possible reason is that since such events are hypothetical (i.e., subjects may not have much experience with the events) a cognitive style is elicited uncontaminated by distortions produced by actual experiences with ordinary events. However, if this is correct, then it is possible

that the relationship of such a cognitive style with depression is itself "hypothetical", existing only as an artificial end product that is not a valid indicator of how individuals actually appraise common events in their everyday lives.

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FOOTNOTES

[1] These scales were constructed to be a comprehensive listing of events and consequently contain a very heterogeneous set of events. Thus many of the events on The Hassles and Uplifts scale do not seem like everyday situations -- for example, "Decisions about having children," or "Laid-off or out of work."

[2] Causal "evenhandedness" has been described as the tendency for depressed subjects to explain both success and failure in similar ways (Rizley, 1978). In other words, depressed individuals' attributional ratings (the numbers they circle on the 7-point scales) are similar for positive and negative events, while normals may differ in their ratings between positive and negative events.

[3] Synchronous correlations are standard Pearson product-moment correlations calculated between two variables that were measured at the same time (here, cognitive variables and BDI scores from the same testing session).

[4] The internal consistency as measured by Cronbach's coefficient alpha was calculated for all of the cognitive variables. The level of internal consistency was above .50 for all scales (above .70 for most scales) with the exception of the internality dimension in which alpha was low, at .289 for unpleasant events in the first session. This failure of internal attributional ratings to reach satisfactory levels of reliability has been a consistent finding (problem) in other studies too (Golin et al., 1981; Peterson, Schwartz & Seligman, 1982).

Table 1

Definitions Used in the Initial Formulation of Ordinary Events

Frequency:	It is realistically possible that the event could actually occur more than once a week. In addition, it is likely that the event will occur at least once a month in a person's life. Similarly, it is very unlikely that the event will not occur at least once a year in an adult's life.
Unexceptional Nature:	The event is not classified as a major life event. In other words, the event is not likely to result in a significant change in the individual's feeling state that persists for several months. In addition, the event is neither a distinct achievement nor failure in a person's career (or scholastic achievement).
Distribution:	A wide variety of working adults are familiar with the event in their everyday lives. Thus, the event occurs and reoccurs in the lives of a variety of people as opposed to being specific to the typical activities of some particular group.

For the purposes of this study ordinary events were restricted by two additional criteria:

The event is concrete and observable as opposed to a cognitive. introspective event. Thus, an outside observer would be able to identify the event.

The event can be reliably classified as either pleasant (positive) or unpleasant (negative) by a group of raters.

Table 2

The 20 Ordinary Events that Were Selected to Elicit Cognitions

1. Solving a problem.
2. Spending too much money to buy something.
3. Enjoyable conversation.
4. Your idea (or suggestion) is ignored.
5. Relating well.
6. The store you go to does not have what you want.
7. Caught in traffic.
8. Getting a lot done.
9. Your idea (or suggestion) is welcomed.
10. Upsetting conversation.
11. Not getting much done.
12. Someone is displeased with you.
13. Making good time while traveling.
14. Quarreling.
15. Meeting a friendly person.
16. The store you go to has exactly what you need.
17. Meeting an unfriendly person.
18. Buying something as a good (low) price.
19. Someone is pleased with you.
20. Cannot solve a problem.

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations of Cognitive Subscales for Students in Upper and Lower Quartiles on the Long Form of The BDI: First Session Data

Measure	Upper Quartile[a] Mean	SD	Lower Quartile[b] Mean	SD	Univariate t	p
Unpleasant Events[c]						
Internality	4.25	0.67	4.17	0.52	-0.77	.4683
Stability	4.60	0.72	4.13	1.02	-2.85g	.0053
Globality	3.79	0.78	2.90	0.91	-5.42	<.0001
Control	4.00	0.61	4.13	0.78	-1.00	.3192
Importance	4.26	0.87	3.68	1.00	-3.20	.0018
Feeling	2.51	0.51	2.81	0.58	2.78	.0063
Characterological Blame	2.62	0.87	1.85	1.13	-4.04g	.0001
Pleasant Events[d]						
Internality	4.63	0.63	4.76	0.62	1.08	.2843
Stability	5.06	0.60	5.26	0.58	1.83	.0699
Globality	4.29	0.88	3.94	0.90	-2.06	.0417
Control	4.63	0.60	4.92	0.75	2.23	.0279
Importance	4.65	0.98	4.47	0.97	-0.99	.3232
Feeling	6.15	0.60	6.05	0.61	-0.85	.3980
EVENHANDEDNESS[e]						
Internality	0.68	0.49	0.68	0.58	0.06	.9547
Stability	0.70	0.60	1.22	0.82	3.87g	.0002
Globality	0.77	0.54	1.09	0.77	2.52g	.0132
Control	0.70	0.61	0.84	0.62	1.20	.2336
Importance	0.61	0.45	0.84	0.77	1.98g	.0508
Attribution Sum[f]						
Unpleasant Events	12.63	1.41	11.20	1.80	-4.53	<.0001
Pleasant Events	13.98	1.58	13.96	1.43	-0.06	.9526

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a. N=48 with mean (SD) BDI score 15.31 (4.96), with range from 10 to 31.
b. N=63 with mean (SD) BDI score 1.06 (.80), with range from 0 to 2.
c. Multivariate Hotelling T on six subscales was 34.75, p=.0001.
d. Multivariate Hotelling T on six subscales was 16.89, p=.0183.
e. Multivariate Hotelling T on five subscales was 15.08, p=.0169.
f. Multivariate Hotelling T on attribution sums for unpleasant and pleasant events was 24.57, p<.0001.
g. Indicates that test for homogeneity of variance failed, thus separate variance t test used.

Table 4

Means and Standard Deviations For Cognitive Scales and Synchronous Correlations Between Cognitive Scores and BDI Long Form Scores: Unpleasant Events

Measure	Mean	(SD)	r	p*	Pearson-Filon Z	p
Internality						
First Session	4.26	(.543)	.062	.3911		
Second Session	4.32	(.622)	-.133	.0654	2.4057	p<.05
Stability						
First Session	4.34	(.891)	.127	.0773		
Second Session	4.23	(.924)	.171	.0172	-0.6250	NS
Globality						
First Session	3.16	(.938)	.319	.0001		
Second Session	3.14	(.984)	.226	.0016	1.4749	NS
Control						
First Session	4.10	(.689)	-.098	.1735		
Second Session	4.16	(.733)	-.185	.0099	1.2245	NS
Importance						
First Session	3.98	(.974)	.213	.0019		
Second Session	3.70	(.942)	.229	.0014	-0.0918	NS
Characterological Blame						
First Session	2.23	(1.07)	.209	.0036		
Second Session	2.13	(1.22)	.089	.2174	1.6328	NS
Attribution Sum						
First Session	11.75	(1.70)	.201	.0002		
Second Session	11.68	(1.72)	.174	.0157	1.3165	NS

Note: N=193.
Synchronous correlations are between BDI scores and cognitive measures within the same session.
* Significance level for rejecting null hypothesis of r=0.